



“Be Ye Steadfast”

The Life and Work of Frances Perkins

by Gordon Berg



“Be Ye Stedfast”

A prim woman, her tricorne hat pinned tightly to her hair, sat amidst the boxes and trunks cluttering the halls of her former employer's home on East 65th Street in New York City and studied the words she had written on a scrap of paper. She knew her old boss was going to Washington to do an important job and would probably ask her to work for him there. Before she accepted, she had to know if he would support the ideas she had written down. Those ideas, hastily scribbled on a cold February night in 1933, have forever changed and improved the life of every person in the United States. Every American is indebted to that woman, whose intelligence and strength of character helped make those ideas a reality.

Before Frances Perkins would accept the Cabinet appointment as Secretary of Labor, she told President-elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “I don’t want to say yes to you unless you know what I’d like to do and are willing to have me go ahead and try.”

She then read Roosevelt her list. It contained much of what would become the New Deal’s most important social welfare and labor legislation: direct federal aid to the states for unemployment relief, public works, maximum hours, minimum wages, child labor laws, unemployment insurance, social security, and revitalized public employment service. “Are you sure you want these thing done?” She asked. “Because you don’t want me for Secretary of Labor if you don’t.”

Roosevelt never hesitated. He was convinced that the capable and strong minded woman in his study was the most qualified person for the job. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll back you.” With that, Perkins immediately accepted the post and served as Secretary of Labor the entire 12 years of the Roosevelt Administration. She was the first woman ever to serve as a Cabinet member and she served longer than any other Secretary of Labor.



Who was this woman in whom Roosevelt had such confidence? How did she become such an expert in the field of labor affairs, traditionally dominated by hard-drinking, cigar-smoking men? To answer these questions brings into focus the life of one of America's most remarkable, yet least known, women. It is a life filled with dedicated hard work, perseverance in the face of great personal adversity, remarkable ability, and some fortunate timing and good luck.

Perkins' social and moral attitudes developed during the early decades of the 20th century, a time when women were increasingly active in the era's many important social crusades. She met and worked with many of the leaders of these movements and by combining the lessons she learned from them with her own unique talents and strengths, she was able to choose her life's work and make a success of it.

Born in Boston on April 10, 1880, this daughter of a Worcester mercantile family had roots dating back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the mid-17th century. After a rather strict upbringing, Perkins entered Mount Holyoke College in the fall of 1898. Although she liked the sciences, a course in American colonial history with Professor Annah May Soule proved far more important to her later life.

Professor Soule required each student to visit a factory and survey its working conditions. For Perkins, going through several textile and paper mills was the first glimpse of the modern industrial process. The things she saw, the conditions under which the workers labored, opened her mind to how the other half lived. The social education of Frances Perkins had begun.



After graduating in 1903, Perkins did volunteer work among the factory girls of Worcester. In 1904, she took a teaching job at Ferry Hall, a girls' prep school in Lake Forest, Ill. While there, she met Dr. Graham Taylor, head of Chicago Commons, one of the city's famous settlement houses. From him, Perkins learned the social meaning of trade unionism and met other social reform leaders including Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, and Grace Abbott. By the time she returned to the east in 1907, Perkins had worked at the Commons, lived at Hull House, and was firmly committed to a vocation as a social worker.

For next 25 years, Perkins' career, first as a social worker and later as a civil servant, was at the center of social reform activities. As the only paid staff member of the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association, Perkins surveyed the city's rooming houses, improved methods of investigations and counseling, and pressured city authorities to enact stricter lodging house licensing. She found time to study economics and sociology at the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce and accepted a fellowship at the New York School of Philanthropy.

Once Perkins arrived in New York, her life's hectic pace picked up even more. She studied for a master's degree at Columbia and surveyed the Hell's Kitchen section of the West Side for Pauline Goldmark, head of the School of Philanthropy. During one of her surveys, she went to see Timothy J. McManus, a state senator and the notorious Tammany Hall boss of Hell's Kitchen. Perkins needed his help for a slum family she had visited. McManus listened and was moved by her arguments. Perkins got the help she needed and learned a valuable political lesson — machine politics could be helpful in enacting social welfare legislation. It was a lesson the pragmatic young social worker soon put to use.



In 1910, Perkins became secretary of the New York Consumers' League. Organized by Lillian Wald of the Henry Street Settlement House, the league spread information about harmful industrial conditions and lobbied for protective legislation. Its national director, Florence Kelley, helped Perkins become a recognized expert on industrial conditions by assigning her to make extensive surveys of unsanitary cellar bakeries, unsafe laundries, and overcrowded textile sweatshops. She taught Perkins to look behind the immediate conditions and search for the real causes of safety and health problems in industry. These surveys gave Perkins the statistics she needed to back up her moral conviction of the need for protective social and labor legislation.

On March 25, 1911, Perkins witnessed a tragic example of just how desperately that legislation was needed. She was having Saturday tea at a neighbor's house near Washington Square in Greenwich Village when the sound of fire engines enticed them outside. The two women ran across the Square to see the upper floors of the Asch Building, occupied by the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, engulfed in flames. In less than an hour, 146 people — most of them young girls — had died. Perkins saw them leap from upper story windows because doors were locked and stairways were too narrow; she saw their charred remains lining the sidewalk and she vowed that this horror could not be allowed to happen again.

The tragedy of the Triangle fire galvanized the city's social reform agencies into action. They formed a Committee on Safety and Perkins soon became its executive secretary. Earlier that year, on a trip to Albany to petition Governor Dix, Perkins met a ruddy-faced Irish-Catholic assemblyman from New York City, Al Smith. He taught Perkins the realities of practical politics; she educated him on the need for reform. Now they joined forces and their long and fruitful relationship helped change the course of American social history.



The Factory Investigating Commission, created by the state legislature in response to the Triangle fire, reviewed the entire scope of job safety and health conditions in New York. Between 1911 and 1915, the commission completely rewrote the New York industrial code and the legislature enacted 36 new laws protecting workers on the job, limiting the hours of women and children, and compensating victims of on-the-job injuries.

Perkins testified four times while working on the staff of the Commission's director of investigation. But she did more than document dangerous working conditions; she made the commissioners experience them. Perkins took them to see children shelling peas in a cannery at 4 a.m.; at dawn, they stood at the gate of a ropeworks as women filed out after working most of the night. Perkins and the legislators went into the workers' homes where they heard, as she had so often heard, of the hardships working people faced on the job. These experiences helped motivate lawmakers to push for strong protective legislation. For Frances Perkins, safe working conditions and reasonable hours of labor were basic human rights which society should guarantee through practical, morally sound, legislation.

As busy as she was, Perkins found time to fall in love and on Sept. 26, 1913, she married Paul C. Wilson, an economist and assistant secretary to John Purroy Mitchell, New York City's reform mayor. The marriage was the source of both great happiness and great heartbreak for Perkins. The couple agreed she would retain her maiden name for professional purposes. Perkins feared she might lose some of the stature she had gained if she changed it. In December 1916, a daughter, Susanna, was born. Both Perkins and Wilson continued their active careers.



But in 1918, Wilson showed the first symptoms of an illness he suffered from then until his death in 1952. Through the long years of his illness, Perkins worked diligently to meet both her family and her professional obligations. Always a very private person, she sought to protect her husband and daughter from the inquisitive press and public. In this, she was largely successful and Miss Perkins continued to carry on her active public service career.

After Al Smith became Governor of New York in 1919, he appointed Perkins to the State Industrial commission despite strong opposition from manufacturers' associations. She rewarded Smith for his confidence in her many times over. When Smith was again elected Governor in 1922 after two years out of office, he reappointed Perkins to her old post. She was also an active member of the Industrial Board of the State Labor Department. By 1926, when Smith appointed her chairman of the Industrial Board, she had become a recognized expert in labor law. Judge Benjamin Cardozo, who sat on a court upholding many of her decisions, said that she had made new law with some of her rulings. Years later Cardozo, then a Supreme Court Justice, would hold Franklin Roosevelt's old Dutch Bible and administer the oath of office to Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor.

Al Smith ran for the presidency in 1928 and lost. Franklin Roosevelt, however, was narrowly elected Governor of New York. Although he did not retain many of Smith's assistants, Roosevelt appointed Perkins Industrial Commissioner of New York. She was the first woman to hold such a position in the United States. During the next 15 years, their partnership altered the basic fabric of American life.



This then, was the woman President Roosevelt entrusted with the awesome responsibility of helping to restore public confidence and to put people back to work. Much had to be done and done quickly. The first 100 days of the Roosevelt Administration are legend. Before it adjourned on June 15, 1933, Congress had enacted 15 major laws. As usual Frances Perkins was at the center of this feverish activity.

Among the programs enacted during Perkins' first year in office were: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), for which the Labor Department recruited about two million young men; the Civil Works Administration (CWA) which created four million temporary jobs during the bitter winter of 1933-34; the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided jobs for eight million people; and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which spent \$4 billion for people in need.

Although Perkins was deeply involved in creating and implementing the Administrations's massive relief and employment programs, she simultaneously worked to reorganize the Department of Labor to make it an effective and efficient government agency. She cleaned up the notorious Bureau of Immigration and increased the responsibilities of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The team Perkins assembled to run the department was considered by many to be one of the best in Washington. Frances Perkins would accept nothing less.



The Social Security Act of 1935 was probably the most enduring contribution Perkins made as a government official. As a member of the Committee on Economic Security, she worked tirelessly to create a practical social security program which could both pass the Congress and help the people. She made hundreds of speeches supporting social security. Its enactment on August 14, 1935, helped change the economic and social structure of American life. Her belief that working people had a right to benefits during unemployment and in their old age was made the law of the land by this act. Perkins' determination helped workers secure a more equitable place on the social scale. Her leadership, and the dedicated work of many others, helped remove the threat of starvation, eviction, and destitution from the doorstep of every worker's home.

If social security was Frances Perkins' pride, the Fair Labor Standards Act must have been her joy. She had long advocated minimum wage and maximum hour legislation. The collapse of labor standards during the Depression made some type of government action imperative. Many among Roosevelt's advisors were uncertain of the constitutionality of federal labor standards legislation. To lay the groundwork for federal standards she believed inevitable, Perkins instructed the Labor Department to work with state governments to create a body of consistent laws and standards. She set up a Division of Labor Standards and was the first Labor Secretary to show real interest and concern for state labor agencies. She always tried to attend meetings with state representatives and considered these sessions very useful in developing workers' compensation and safety and health standards.



During his 1936 campaign for reelection, Roosevelt promised to support a federal labor standards bill. The measure passed the Senate but died in the House Rules Committee. Perkins and Roosevelt would not let it rest in peace. Compromises were made and pressure was applied. The Fair Labor Standards Act finally became law on June 25, 1938.

The last of the New Deal's major social measures, this act was also one of its most far reaching. It covered 12 million workers and immediately raised the pay of 300,000 people and shortened hours for a million more. Most workers involved in interstate commerce or producing goods for interstate commerce were covered by the law. Child labor, a major concern of Perkins since her days as a social worker, was prohibited in many industries.

Perkins' greatest trial during her term of office came not from management or labor but from the Congress. The attack was not on her ability, but on her integrity. The issue centered on Harry Bridges, an Australian and leader of a long and bitter longshoremen's strike on the west coast in 1934. The Labor Department and the FBI, investigating allegations of communist influence in the strike, could find no evidence to justify deporting Bridges as an undesirable alien. But a vicious whispering campaign, aimed at forcing Bridges out of the country and Perkins out of office, began in mid-1938.

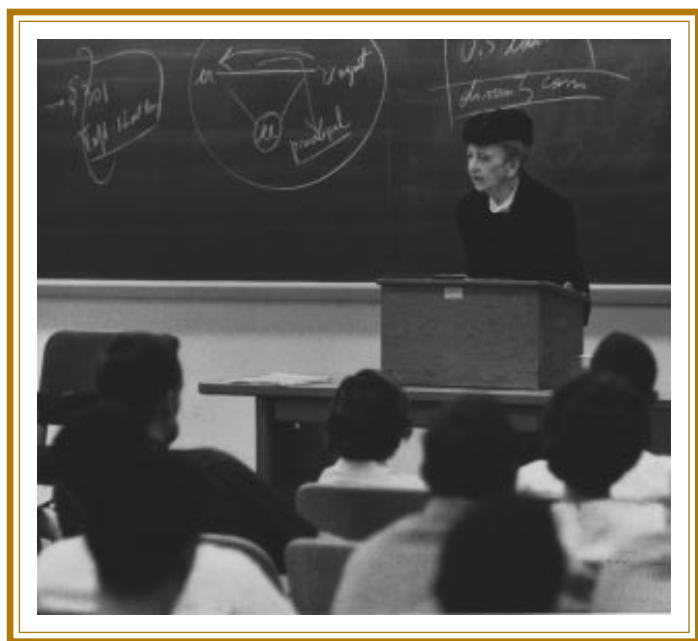
A special House Committee on Un-American Activities held hearings and its chairman, Martin Dies, publicly called for Perkins' resignation. Hate mail poured into the Labor Department. The ordeal lasted over six months. Through it all, Perkins continued to meet every engagement, fulfilled her duties as Secretary and stood firm in her decision not to order Bridges deported. In the end, the House Judiciary Committee confirmed Perkins' opinion by reporting that sufficient evidence had not been presented to warrant Bridges' deportation. The official proceedings were closed, but the ugly scars remained.



The social legislation of the 1930s forever changed the living and working conditions of most Americans. While the Federal Government was often instrumental in creating these laws and indispensable for putting them into operation, Perkins often advocated more involvement for the individual states. She believed that programs such as unemployment insurance should be administered by a federal-state system. At the National Conference for Labor Legislation in February 1934, she said: "The fundamental power to make regulations with regard to welfare...lies with the sovereign states." While many New Dealers have been seen as "big government" people, Perkins rarely favored the federal government dictating or making policy for the states. The closer the decisionmaking process was to the people, the better Perkins liked it.

The outbreak of World War II dramatically shifted much government attention from domestic to foreign and military affairs. But Perkins still fought some important, though less historic, battles on the home front. She counseled Roosevelt against FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's plan to fingerprint and keep a dossier on every citizen. The idea went against her firm belief that privacy was the basis of true individual liberty. The internment of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans — two-thirds of them U.S. citizens — horrified her. Even at the height of the war, Perkins opposed extraordinary measure for total national mobilization. She thought the social regimentation which might result was a step toward treating people like cattle. Her trust in the innate intelligence of the people to make sound decisions and to act on them never wavered.

During her years in office, Perkins' steadfast commitment to principles of law and morality won her many admirers from all walks of life. In her work, however, her loyalties were few and well defined. In a letter to Justice Felix Frankfurter, written just after her resignation as Secretary of Labor, she said "I came to work for God, F.D.R., and the millions of forgotten, plain, common working men." Friend or foe, powerful or powerless, they were all treated squarely and honestly by Frances Perkins.



When Roosevelt died in April 1945, Perkins submitted her resignation as Secretary of Labor. She was 65, but had no intention of retiring. In October, President Harry Truman sent her as a government representative to the International Labor Organization meeting in Paris. Perkins certainly deserved to go since it was she who originally urged Roosevelt in 1934 to submit legislation — which was accepted by Congress — authorizing the President to apply for membership to the ILO.

On September 26, 1946, Truman appointed Perkins to the Civil Service Commission. During her seven years as a commissioner, the principle guiding all her work was that the Commission “is concerned only with the question as to whether the applicant is a suitable person for the post for which he applies.” She opposed any questions on applications which pried into a person’s private life. A lifetime of experience had convinced her that the right to privacy was a basic human right, the basis of liberty in a democratic society.

Frances Perkins ended her government career in 1952. She still had no thought of retirement. For two years she lectured and held seminars at the University of Illinois. In the spring of 1955, however, she left and returned to New York, the city where she began her illustrious career.

In May 1955, Perkins delivered a lecture at Cornell University. A few months later she was asked to join the faculty of the university’s prestigious School of Industrial and Labor Relations. In the spring of 1960, she was asked to become a member of the scholarly Telluride Association at Cornell. As was the case so many times in the past, Perkins was the first woman ever to live at Telluride House. After her, there were many. Telluride and her work at Cornell made her last years happy and personally fulfilling.



If the social thought of so complex a person can be summarized, it might be found in the introduction to the 1937 Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor. In it, Perkins wrote: "In a successful democracy there must be a certain minimum unity of purpose and some contribution from the citizens as a whole to the idea and practice of the general welfare. Where the lives of millions of persons are involved...there must necessarily be a multiple of complications, sharp difference of opinion, friction at many points. Always, however, there remains the predominant idea that through understanding of human problems involved, a sane and sensible adjustment can be created." Frances Perkins believed that the voice of the people must always be heard in government. Only through the free and open discussion of differing points of view could the truth emerge and human needs and problems be solved. Frances Perkins always employed those ideals in conducting the public's business for the public's benefits. Her life was a testament to the words chosen by her senior class at Mount Holyoke as their motto. From 1 Corinthians 15:58, it says simply "Be ye Stedfast." Frances Perkins lived up to that motto every day of her life.

Frances Perkins died on May 14, 1965. At a memorial service organized by her friends at Cornell, Professor Maurice Neufeld recalled that "the Frances Perkins we knew appeared among us out of history." Perkins, indeed had become an important historical figure. Yet with all her accomplishments, she never lost the basic qualities that made her an extraordinary person: her courage, her vibrant personality, her gift for friendship, her sense of propriety and privacy, and her deep religious spirit. These qualities formed the core of her character and they touched everyone she knew as well as the millions of people unknown to her for whom she worked throughout her life.

Frances Perkins instructed that her burial service be simple and that only a plain stone mark her final resting place. Her wishes have been followed to the letter. But she does not lie forgotten in that quiet country cemetery in Newcastle, Maine. Her spirit lives in every home and workplace in America. Though her life now belongs to history, the legacy Frances Perkins left behind belongs to us all.

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